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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether there were significant differences between male and female basic writers, examining the writing processes and products of 19 male and female college freshmen basic writers in a university and 33 male and female freshmen basic writers in a junior college. Results indicated that both groups of students, male and female alike, had difficulty meeting the demands of college prose. It is the intersection of such variables as race, gender, and class that determines which students are labeled as "basic" writers. The researchers are now compiling data to investigate quantitatively the influence of race, gender, and class on the writing processes and products of basic writers. Early analysis of this data has revealed some interesting trends. One such trend finds male basic writers having difficulty with what is generally considered the "male" language of the academy. This suggests that "male" is only a metaphor for a kind of writing that is linear, hierarchical, evaluative, distanced, and controlled. Males who prefer other forms of expression do exist, and are seen with great frequency in basic writing classes. They are shunted into remediation classes until they learn to be distanced, controlled, analytical thinkers--"male" in the way the dominant culture defines "male." There is a danger in the basic writing teacher's intermediary position: that of asking students to give away too much of themselves, their voices and their stories, in order to achieve what the college or university community wants. (Thirty-two references are attached.) (SR)

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CAN WE GET THERE FROM HERE? THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, GENDER AND CLASS

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As composition teachers and researchers, we are interested in helping our students expand their abilities to appreciate, understand and use language effectively in the academy. Of course, we are speaking of all of our students: female, male, black, white, native born, immigrants, young, old, urban, and rural.

For most of us, however, we have a mere 10 to 16 weeks to prepare our students to meet the "rigorous" demands of the discourse they are required to master in order to communicate in the manner considered "appropriate" for college work. As you all well know, our particular charge is to teach our students the language of the academy on whose rim they are so precariously perched while enrolled in our basic writing classes or developmental studies programs . In my case, as I would venture

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to guess, one which probably parallels many of your own teaching situations, my "academy" is not housed in a quintessional ivory tower somewhere, tempered by liberalism, humanism or social justice, but rather one which can be found in a major urban area - - a university controlled by mostly white , northern-educated, protective professors, whose student body, ironically, consists of many older, nontraditional students, often nonwhite females who have decided to return to college. These students are often underprepared and overburdened with work and family obligations. However, many of these professors still find it their obligation to struggle daily to protect and preserve the purity of the English language valued so highly in the academic community. Often this academic community is one that Pamela Annas describes in her 1979 article "Style as Politics: A Feminist Approach to the Teaching of Writing" as an institution that values defended, linear, and objective writing. Indeed many writing classes seem designed to teach the use of abstract, logical and impersonal

rather than sensual, contextual and committed language" (pg. 360).

From our reading in feminist and literary theory, as well as communication and cultural studies, we, like many other researchers believe that the language valued in the academy, in our colleges and universities, is often described as male. Based on our own research, however, we believe that this description is metaphorical rather than literal, and that indeed, it is often the case that males who are basic writers are just as likely as females to lack the "male" voice preferred by the dominant culture.

Like Robin Lakoff (1975) and other researchers, we also believe that what is often described in the literature as "women's language" is most often viewed as deficient and only at best, different. Consequently, in order to help our basic writers to do well in their future writing classes, we began to look for research bridging the gap between feminism, literary

theory and composition studies. As a result of these readings, we believed that there might be a relationship between students' gender and their writing processes. In particular, we started searching for research investigating the influence of gender on the language processes of male and female basic writers, our own students. We discovered research and theory about this relationship in the writings of Elizabeth Flynn, Susan Peterson, Geoffrey Sirc, Patricia Sullivan and others who have analyzed the writings of regularly enrolled college freshmen composition students. In addition, we were intrigued by the research of Paul Hunter, Nadine Pearce, Sue Lee and their colleagues examining the writing processes and products of basic writers. Beginning our own work, we adopted the research questions that Elizabeth Flynn posited in her 1988 article "Composing as a Woman":

> Do males and females compose differently?
>
> Do they acquire language in different ways?

Do research methods and research samples in composition reflect a male bias?

In order to answer those general research questions and our own more specialized concerns about the influence of gender on the language processes of basic writers, my colleague and I conducted a study replicating and continuing the earlier work of Hunter, Pierce, Lee et al. In our study, we examined the writing processes and written products of 19 male and female university basic college freshmen writers and 33 male and female junior college basic freshmen writers. The theoretical framework that guided our work was that of gender differences in writing. The major question we used to develop the study was "Are there significant differences betwen male and female basic writers? And if so, what are they? What we discoverd is that, as with most other issues in teaching composition, it depends. There are no easy answers, just as there are no easy categories into which to pigeon hole students--no easy ways to teach students to write

academic discourse--and no easy ways to grade and evaluate written work.

The following is a brief description of the study: After students were administered the Daly and Miller Writing Anxiety Scale (1975), they wrote drafts on two related topics: one on a reflexive topic, and the other, on an extensive topic (Perl, 1980). These two topics were randomly assigned with one topic concerned with discipline of children and the other with the importance of friendship in school. Students were also individually interviewed concerning their writing processes and asked to indicate topic preferences.

These drafts were analyzed for content, length, time of production, use of first and second person pronouns, and examples of advice giving. Interview questions investigated students' writing processes, topic preferences and writing histories.

The results of our study both confirmed the work of earlier researchers and contributed new information to the field. Our

college basic female writers, for example, used more first person pronouns than males, and both males and females used fewer pronouns when writing extensive essays. Surprsingly, however, the males in this study used the second person pronoun "you" more often than females in both drafts, utilizing them more often in the extensive mode. In addition, males offered more advice than females, often beginning sentences with "You should or you could."

Interview responses indicated an equal preference for both reflexive and extensive topics with this assignment, and the writing anxiety scale showed that both males and females were highly anxious about writing. Results also have shown that topic choice and topic development were not gendered as has been suggested by earlier researchers.

As a result of talking to our students, both informally and through in-depth interviews, and as a result of the experimental evidence, we are now beginning to believe that perhaps basic

writers' difficulty with academic discourse cannot be completely explained by gender differences, since both groups of students, male and female alike, had difficulty meeting the demands of college prose. Black, white, male, female, young and old: many of our basic writers, whom we consider the marginalized ones, often struggle to interpret the confusing rules and regulations of the language of the academy. Consequently, we now believe it is the intersection of such variables as race, gender and class that determines which students are labelled as "basic" writers and unfortunately how likely they are to miss the academic mark.

Moving away from experimental research, and in a way, answering for ourselves, Elizabeth Flynn's third question: Do research methods and research samples in composition reflect a male bias?, we are now compiling data to investigate qualitatively the influence of race, gender, and class on the writing processes and products of our basic writers. We are now heeding the advice of Linda Brodkey in her 1989 article " On the

Subjects of Class and Gender in 'The Literacy Letters'." She states that "Since writers cannot avoid constructing a social and political reality in their texts, as teachers and researchers we need to learn how to 'read' the various relationships between writer, reader, and reality that language and discourse supposedly produce" (p. 125). We have now expanded our research to examine aspects other than gender.

We have begun in this fashion: Each quarter, we require our students to keep a portfolio of their compositions which we collect and grade at the midpoint of the quarter. When the students turn in their portfolios, we ask them to rank their papers for quality: We ask them to tell us, "In your own opinion, which is your best paper, your second best paper, and your third best paper. Students are requested to explain their rankings in detail both in writing and in oral interviews. They are also asked to discuss their strong and weak points as writers, a sort

of self-evaluation. Finally, we ask them to reflect on and describe their plan to improve their writing in the future.

We are now looking for trends in this data and plan on collecting portfolios for a year in order to amass a large student sample. Besides examining this data through the filters of gender, race and educational background, we are also investigating each student's experience with our developmental studies composition classes. For example, we are wondering if our multiple repeaters will be better expository or academic writers, than incoming students regardless of race, class or gender? We are also investigating the order in which these three papers were written, the types of topics and topic development (reflexive or extensive), and the grades students receive on their essays. It will be very interesting to note if student and teacher evaluations match.

Early analysis of this data has revealed some interesting trends: Let me tell you of one of them, dealing with our male students.

First, males--white native born--white immigrants--and non-white-students who are enrolled in our basic writing classes seem to have difficulty with what is generally considered "male" language of the academy. Instead, many of our male students prefer to write about their "feelings" in ways that are more connected and relational tham objective and rational, or "academic": Here are some excerpts from their evaluations:

"I believe that through my writings I have come to express myself with great feelings."

"I find it hard to express my feelings" about topics that I have had to read about in the text. "I chose my essays about arguments with parents first because I like to write about experiences I am familiar with. I put my essay about young people in love second because I can relate to dating, but I

really don't know about dating in China." This comment is particulalry revealing because the essay was assigned after the students had read and extensively discussed an essay on dating in China. In both essays, this student is compelled to highly value that which he "can personally relate to--his own experience" and to devalue or dismiss that which he has read and discussed in class.

Another student writes..."The first paper I wrote was the best because it was a paper I could relate to and I knew how to express my feeings on that paper. The paper I wrote on women was hard because I cannot relate to how women in America feel. Again, this student values his "feelings" and his ability to "relate to" a writing topic even though each essay was assigned based on a reading from the text.

Another sensitive student writes "I enjoyed working on this paper the most because the very strong feelings I have about women in not having equality with men, therefore I rank this

paper number 1. The second paper I rank is the one about the nanny. I felt like I wrote a nice paper since I could relate to the feelings Sri Delima had towmard her nanny to Carabelle [his own nanny], therefore I rank this paper number 2. The third paper I rank is the memo to the Toyota section manager. I had to write this paper clear from scratch in my head because I was not able to relate it to myself or anyone else like I was able to in the first two essays I had written, therefore I rank this number 3." Again, this student values his ability to relate and connect to other people and his own experiences. He discounts those ideas that come from his "head" and the text alone.

A particularly interesting example comes from a Greek male, tri-lingual student who values personal relationships in evaluating and improving his writing. Even though he is very fluent in English, his writing is not linear and hierarchical. He has trouble "sticking to the topic" as defined in academic

discourse, and resents what he sees as the imposition of a very narrow form of discourse style on his essay writing:

"My papers have definitely improved since the start of the quarter with the help of the people in my group. Chris is a very good friend of mine, and so is Vanessa, therefore I trust their judgement and I listen to their constructive criticism...I know Dr. Gowen understands my papers because she knows how Greeks must put their opinions into everything." This student is learning how to play the academic game -- to write in a more linear fashion. He is able to see this type of writing as very different from the style that is preferred in his own culture, and is still the style he prefers as well. He thinks the academic constraints of written language are reductive, dry and terribly uninteresting...no life in them as he would say.

What do these brief glimpses into the values and preferences of our male students who have been categorized as "basic writers" tell us? We believe it suggests that "male" is only a metaphor

for a kind of writing that is linear, hierachical, evaluative, distanced and controlled. Males who prefer other forms of expression do exist, and are seen with great frequency in our basic writing classes. Their feelings and relational thinking patterns are not valued by the academy. Instead, they are shunted into remediation classes until they learn to be distanced, controlled, analytical thinkers--"male" in the way the dominant culture defines "male." What does this say to us as teachers of basic writers, male and female? What is our role? Is the purpose of teaching writing to purge discourse of feelings and relations in favor of analysis and control? Who pays the price for this purging ? And what are its implications? More importantly, we should ask ourselves how can we mediate between the values of the academy and the preferences and abilities of our students?

In conclusion, the implications for teaching and research are many. I want to leave you with a warning. Even though we believe in the value of our role as mediator between the academy

and our students, we recognize a danger in this position : namely, that in accepting this intercessory role , we might ask our students to give away too much of themselves, their voices and their stories, in order to achieve what the college or university community wants. Students might be silenced and remain silent, perhaps forever. Michelle Fine in her 1987 article in "Silencing in Public Schools" warns us that "Silencing constitutes the process by which contradictory evidence, ideologies, and experiences find themselves buried, camouflaged and discredited, and schools often make irrelevant the lived experiences, passions, concerns, communities and biographies of low-income minority students (p. 157-158). Rather, to better understand our basic writers, we should strive to answer Patricia Bizell"s questions and not compromise our students:

"What world view do basic writers bring to college?

What is the new world view demanded in college?

Do basic writers have to give up the world views th y bring to college in order to learn the new world view?"

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